To 99 percent of the world, and a healthy portion of New Yorkers, the sentence "I'm going down on Sunday to pick up some appetizing" will make no sense whatever. For one thing, most people recognize appetizing as an adjective. Only in New York is it a glorious collective noun, one that refers to the range of traditional Jewish smoked and cured fish. More than that, the idea of buying a spread of lox, whitefish and sturgeon on a Sunday morning evokes, for many, a particular cultural memory. "When I was young, I would go with my dad to Talachinsky's appetizing store in Newark every weekend," remembers Ed Koch. "I loved the stuff." Many years later, Zabar's lox and whitefish made regular Sunday-morning appearances on the Gracie Mansion table during Koch's mayoralty. Koch's story could as well be told by any number of Jews from his generation. Picking up appetizing survives as a quintessential New York ritual—and an appetizing one, at that.

For the past ten years, though, appetizing has undergone two distinct cultural processes. First, the specialized appetizing stores that used to flourish on the Lower East and Upper West Sides have all but died out. "There used to be easily one or two on every block around here," says Mark Russ Federman, owner of Russ & Daughters Appetizers, which his grandfather opened on Houston Street in 1914. Now Russ & Daughters is the only downtown store devoted to appetizing. The Upper West Side offers more, but only slightly: Zabar's, which began as an appetizing store in 1934 and has since expanded to a full gourmet emporium, is still renowned for its smoked fish and is mobbed every weekend, as is Barney Greengrass, which remains in the Greengrass family, and Murray's Sturgeon Shop, which is on its third owner. These four stores are all that's left in Manhattan of this once-thriving ethnic-food industry.

At the same time, smoked fish has begun to go the de-ethnicized route of bagels and pizza. It seems every bagel store and supermarket in the city has a display case with one or more varieties of smoked salmon, a couple of whole whitefish or chubs and even specialty items like sablefish (also known simply as a sable) "It's what I call the 'bagel boom','" says Robert Caslow, vice president and grandson of the founder of Acme Smoked Fish, a 50-year-old business that is now the largest producer of smoked fish in the New York area. "Suddenly it seems like everybody's got appetizing." This is in no small part thanks to Acme itself, which ships fish and its own line of prepared dishes to about 2,000 supermarkets, bagel stores and gourmet shops every week.

Still, many New Yorkers remain mystified by the array of appetizing possibilities. Herewith, a brief introduction.

**Smoked Salmon**

Chances are you have never actually tasted lox, although you may have been sold something called that at your local bagel store. Lox has come to be a generic term for smoked salmon—easily the most assimilated type of appetizing. However, the word actually refers to salmon that has been salt cured, either by soaking in brine or by being hand-rubbed with salt (much like its Swedish relative gravlax, which is raw salmon cured in salt, sugar and dill). This process will come as no surprise if you have ever tasted a pink sliver of real lox and felt the glands in the back of your mouth contract from the salt overload.
Lox is the original appetizing — the stuff that Mark Federman's grandfather, Joel Russ, started selling out of a Lower East Side pushcart in the 1910s. By the late 30’s, however, technological advances ushered in the era of smoked fish. At that time, salmon were frequently caught in Nova Scotia, and smoked salmon became generally distinguished from lox as nova.

Smoked salmon remains far and away the most popular item on the appetizing roster. Robert Caslows estimates that Acme smokes more than 60,000 pounds of salmon a week, a figure that’s easy to believe while standing on the company’s Brooklyn loading dock and watching a shipment of salmon fillets pour off a truck. From here they will be soaked in steel tanks of brine for several days and then smoked for less than a day in a monstrous, bi-level, sauna-like smoke room. The smoke is produced from hickory chips in a tiny oven outside the door of the room and then pumped in and circulated among the racks of fillets by giant fans. This method of “cold-smoking” allows the salmon to retain the silky texture of raw fish instead of a cooked consistency.

The specialty stores now carry countless varieties of smoked salmon - Scottish salmon, Irish salmon, honey-baked salmon, salmon pastrami - each with its own subtly different taste. Even fish from the same batch will vary in flavor. “Every fish takes the smoke a little differently, like the way women wear perfume,” says Irina Goller, who has owned Murray’s Sturgeon Shop since 1990. The differences are generally plotted along axes of saltiness, smokiness and fattiness. The American phobia of fat has led many people to request lean salmon, but it’s generally agreed that fattier is tastier. (Besides, fish fat is good for the heart.) As common as smoked salmon has become, the price remains high, ranging between $20 and $35 per pound.

A knowledgeable salesperson, who will help you locate your ideal salmon and allow you to sample different varieties, is one big asset you’ll find at a specialty appetizing store but not your local bagelry. And while smokehouses like Acme sell essentially the same product to supermarkets as they do to the specialty shops, the specialists exercise more quality control. At 71, Saul Zabar still visits Acme’s factory every week to choose his fish and provides the company with smoking specifications. But just as important a reason to shop the specialty stores is the chance to watch an experienced salmon slicer at work, with the knife held at such an acute angle that you can see the long, thin blade gliding under the translucent flesh. A great slicer can achieve something approaching cult status. Author and enthusiastic eater Calvin Trillin, a longtime customer at Russ & Daughters, talks about a cutter at the store who slices salmon so thin you can read The New York Times through it. When Sam Cohen, a Holocaust survivor, who spent decades behind the counter at Zabar’s died last week, he was hailed in a Times obituary as the “dean of lox slicers.” (As an interesting cultural side note, the business of slicing and selling appetizing seems to have become dominated by immigrants from South and Central America. “I’ve never seen them eat the stuff,” says Zabar. “But they sure cut it good.”)

Whitefish

A distant second to smoked salmon in popularity are whitefish and their smaller cousin, chubs, both caught in the Great Lakes. These are golden-hued whole smoked fish, the skin of which pulls away to reveal sweet chunks of oily white meat amid tiny bones. As opposed to salmon, whitefish and chubs are hot-smoked in 160-degree ovens, giving them a firm, flaky consistency. And like salmon, each is slightly different. (Unlike salmon, they cost only about $9 to $10 per pound.)

Again, a good salesperson will help you to pick the whitefish that’s perfect for you, though some customers have their own ideas; Mel Brooks tells a story about an appetizing store near his childhood home in Williamsburg. One day, a Mrs. Blume came to the store, looked at the huge display in the window of stacked whitefish, noses all pointing at the glass, and called the owner out. “She points to the fish third from the bottom,” Brooks remembers, “and says ‘I want him.’ The guy says, ‘Look, right here at the top, there’s a fella that looks just like him!’ Mrs. Blume shakes her head: ‘I want him.’ Eventually, the man tries carefully to extract the desired fish, only to end up buried in the collapsed display. “But,” Brooks says, laughing, “she got him.”

The past decade has also seen a boom in whitefish salad, of which each of the specialty stores makes its own version. The most basic can be had at Zabar’s – smooth, heavy on the mayo and speckled with celery ($10.98/lb). Barney Greengrass produces a stronger-flavored version ($12/lb), while the salad at Murray’s has big chunks of fish but is rather bland ($14/lb). Russ & Daughters combines whitefish with baked salmon for its salad ($12/lb) and the result is delicious, rich and smokier than a campfire.

Sable and Sturgeon

These highly perishable and difficult-to-maintain fishes are two of the least familiar and most expensive appetizing items. With sable, which is the same fish as Pacific black cod, this wasn’t always the case. “We used to call it ‘the poor man’s sturgeon’ says Zabar. Then in the 1980s the Japanese suddenly went wild for black cod, scooping up the supply and driving the price sky-high. Today, a fish that used to sell for 50 cents per pound can’t be bought for less than $24.

It’s worth it. At Acme, sable is cured and rubbered with a light coating of paprika and garlic and then smoked at 100 degrees, halfway between hot-and-cold-smoked. The result is so delicate and silky that the meat feels like it’s held together by water. A feathery slice of sable goes well on top of a bagel of salmon and cream cheese. But the salty, flavorful meat, augmented by just a tinge of spice from the paprika rub, is best enjoyed solo.

Sturgeon has a firm almost pressed consistency and a subtle, meaty flavor. At roughly $32 per pound, the fish is the prestige item of the appetizing world. It is also the only item that is non-kosher (it lacks scales). Barney Greengrass has long advertised itself as the “Sturgeon King,” a nickname that once prompted Joel Russ to promote his daughters as the queens of the same fish.

Herring

That brings us to herring, the least respected of all fish. Never mind that herring has more or less defined Scandinavian culture for centuries, that it has been the cause of wars and the backbone of major work economies – the fact remains that herring is considered something of a joke.

“At one point, I had the delusion that I could restore herring to its rightful place on the food spectrum, that I could be the McDonald’s of herring,” says Mark Federman. “But I couldn’t do it. There’s too much resistance.”